

James Bland: The World's Greatest Minstrel Man

Although they were born nearly a century apart, there are striking parallels between the lives of James Bland and John Denver. Both white Southerner Denver and black Northerner Bland had distinguished fathers, both flunked out of higher education to chase the dream, both got lucky at an early age, and both died in tragic if entirely different circumstances, Denver in a plane crash, Bland in poverty. But while Denver's star was on the wane when he died, his place in history was already secured, while it was not until more than three decades after his death that Bland's greatness was truly appreciated.

The only dedicated biography of Bland was published in 1951; unfortunately, *A Song In His Heart*, by John Jay Daly, is not properly referenced and is filled with speculative or even invented dialogue, but from this and other (at times conflicting) sources it is possible to construct an illuminating picture of The World's Greatest Minstrel Man.

James Allen Bland was born at Flushing, New York on October 12, 1854, eleven years before the total abolition of slavery in the United States. His freeborn father, Allen, was the first Negro Examiner of Patents, and surely entertained great ambitions for his son, who was already well on his way to following in his footsteps when he enlisted at the prestigious Howard University.

Writing in *Black Popular Music In America*, Arnold Shaw says "A number of historians have reported that Bland was graduated from Howard, and have given his birth year as 1854. A letter from the Assistant Registrar, dated November 4, 1983, states: 'Our records do not reflect that James A. Bland graduated from Howard University. He was, however, admitted in 1870 at the age of 14 and continued his studies in Arithmetic, Geography and Reading through December, 1872.' If he was 14 in 1870, his birth year would be 1856."

This statement appears to be half true. According to Clifford Muse of Howard University writing in January 2009: "The *Howard University Directory of Graduates, 1870-1963* doesn't list Mr. Bland as a graduate", but researcher Angela Walton-Raji confirmed his year of birth "In the 1860 census, James Bland is enumerated with his parents in Troy NY. He is listed as 5 years old. Note that the census data was collected in July and if his birthday is known to be in October, then on his next birthday he would have been 6 years old, thus confirming that he was probably born in 1854 as reported. No official birth certificate exists from NY at that time, however, since this is the census created at the time closest to his birth, then I would consider the reports of 1854 to be accurate".

It may be that Bland and/or his father lied about his age, but though young men have been known to lie about their ages to enlist in the armed forces, it is difficult to imagine any rational reason for such a pretence in this case, so it is more likely to be an administrative error, perhaps due to sloppy handwriting or a simple misreading. Whatever, it is not important, far more important are the details of Bland's life, which are at times sketchy, vague and poorly documented, in spite of his spectacular rise to fame.

According to Shaw, it was a performance of the Primrose Minstrels that led to Bland dropping his academic studies. He mastered the banjo, and gigged around Washington until 1875 when he became the manager of and starred in the Original Black Diamonds in Boston, moving on to Bohee Brothers Minstrels, Sprague's Georgia Minstrels and Haverly's Colored Minstrels, travelling to England with them and staying on when the troupe left, playing solo performances to turnaway crowds there and on the Continent.

He was only accepted as a minstrel because of his songwriting talent, but what a talent that was.

His two greatest songs were written early on in his career: "Carry Me Back To Old Virginny" and "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers!" are unquestionably the finest of the genre - the coon song - behind only "The Lily Of Laguna". With the rise of political correctness and the stupid epithet *racist* applied to anything vaguely associated with minstrelsy, songs of this nature have become despised, but minstrels - whites (who performed in blackface) and blacks - were above all entertainers, and unflattering and exaggerated stereotypes have long been an essential ingredient of theatre and all forms of entertainment from the ugly sisters of Cinderella through the supposedly anti-Semitic Fagin of *Oliver Twist* down to the English civil servant with briefcase, umbrella and stiff upper lip. *Racist* or not, minstrelsy provided a good living for Bland and other black entertainers, so much so that he was said at his peak to be making around ten thousand dollars a year exclusive of his income from songs, a staggering sum then for even a college educated black man or a working man of any race.

In London, Bland rented a dwelling in Battersea and performed in clubs and restaurants and toured Europe where he made a lasting impression; according to Daly, the German journalist Hans Wunderlich said that "Before the turn of the century, only three American composers made an appreciable dent in the German consciousness: John Philip Sousa, James A. Bland, and Stephen Foster". Bland is rightly regarded as the spiritual heir to Foster, and his songs have at times been misattributed to the white Southerner.

Back in the USA, Bland was said to have purchased "the largest diamond ever worn probably by a colored person", a massive four and a half carat stone.

Alas, the demise of *racist* minstrelsy also heralded the demise of James Bland. As his artform was superceded by Vaudeville and then ragtime, he found himself redundant, and impoverished if not destitute. He tried his hand at writing a full blown musical, *The Sporting Girl*, but it was not a success.

It must be said that he probably had himself to blame for ending his days in poverty. As well as his taste for fine living, as evinced by his purchase of the aforementioned diamond, he clearly failed to make adequate provision for his retirement, and perhaps worst of all, he neglected to copyright the vast body of his work; according to the 1946 compilation *The JAMES A. BLAND Album of OUTSTANDING SONGS*...only thirty-eight of perhaps seven hundred of his songs were on file with the Library Of Congress. In view of his father's occupation this was an incredible oversight, and undoubtedly led to considerable loss of income.

Bland died in Philadelphia on May 5, 1911, practically unnoticed, and all but forgotten - the man but not his songs - until in 1939 the editor of *The Etude* magazine located his grave with the help of Bland's sister; his immortality was assured the following year when "Carry Me Back To Old Virginny" was adopted as the Official State Song of Virginia. In 1946, a proper stone was erected on his grave; a photograph of which can be found in Daly's book.

James Bland was inducted into the Songwriters' Hall Of Fame in 1970; a housing project in Queens, New York was named after him, and perhaps most fittingly, in 1948 a Bland Music Foundation was founded to provide scholarships for the gifted youth of Virginia.

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